



Rooted Through Recovery Trauma Responses At A Glance

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Understanding Trauma Responses: A Guide to Recognition and Regulation

What Are Trauma Responses?

When your brain or body perceives a threat—whether real or remembered—your nervous system responds automatically to keep you safe. These responses aren't chosen; they're wired in for survival.

In trauma recovery, we name these patterns not as weaknesses or flaws, but as brilliant survival strategies. But what kept you safe then may now be keeping you stuck.

When we learn to recognize these responses in real time—before they spiral—we give ourselves the power to choose differently.

Many relapses, whether into substances, behaviors, or relationships, begin as unrecognized trauma loops. The fight, flight, freeze, fawn, flop, or fragment state hijacks the nervous system long before the behavior shows up. By noticing what's happening in the body first, we interrupt the loop before it becomes action. Recovery is not just about abstaining—it's about learning to track what's underneath, so we don't keep losing ourselves to the survival brain.

This guide helps you **recognize** these responses in real time and offers **gentle tools to regulate** and return to safety.

1. Fight Response

“I have to push through, fight back, or take control.”

How It Shows Up:

- Rage or irritation
- Arguing, yelling, clenching fists or jaw
- Defensiveness or need to “win”
- Anxiety masked as control or urgency
- Tension in shoulders, face, or hands

What It’s Protecting:

- A sense of powerlessness, helplessness, or betrayal
- Fear of being hurt or violated again

How to Regulate Fight:

- **Move your body:** Shake your arms, push gently into a wall, stomp your feet
- **Let sound out:** Sigh, groan, or hum to release charge
- **Breathe** into your belly: Inhale through nose, exhale with sound
- Practice **boundaries:** Channel the energy into naming what is and isn’t okay

2. Flight Response

“I need to get away. I can’t be here.”

How It Shows Up:

- Panic, racing thoughts, obsessing over escape plans
- Overworking or constant busyness
- Avoidance or perfectionism
- Fidgeting, restlessness, jittery energy

- Shallow breathing

What It's Protecting:

- A fear of being trapped, helpless, or out of control
- Past experiences of harm you couldn't escape

How to Regulate Flight:

- **Ground through your senses:** Name 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear...
- **Orient to safety:** Look around the room, locate exits, connect to the present
- **Slow your breath:** Inhale for 4, exhale for 6
- Try **gentle walking**, **pendulation** (rocking), or **weighted blankets**

3. Freeze Response

"I can't move. I feel stuck or shut down."

How It Shows Up:

- Numbness, disconnection, dissociation
- Inability to make decisions
- Feeling like you're watching life from the outside
- Body feels heavy, sluggish, or collapsed
- Emotional flatness or apathy

What It's Protecting:

- Overwhelming emotion, pain, or fear the system couldn't process at the time
- A history of helplessness or shock

How to Regulate Freeze:

- **Tiny movements:** Wiggle your fingers, shift your eyes, curl your toes
- Bring warmth: **Hot tea, blankets, sunlight**, or a **warm bath**
- **Name what's happening:** "I notice I feel shut down. I am still here."

- Use gentle stimulation: Textures, soft tapping, humming, singing

4. Fawn Response

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you close or keep the peace.”

How It Shows Up:

- People-pleasing, self-abandonment, or always saying yes
- Hypervigilance to others’ needs or moods
- Anxiety around disapproval, rejection, or conflict
- Inability to ask for help or name your own needs

What It’s Protecting:

- A fear of abandonment, rejection, or being punished for taking up space
- A nervous system trained to seek safety through appeasement

How to Regulate Fawn:

- **Pause before saying yes:** “Let me think about that” or “I’ll get back to you”
- **Journal your own needs** before others’
- Practice **saying no** in safe places
- Place your hand over your heart and say: “I matter too.”

5. Flop Response

“I give up. I can’t fight, flee, or even freeze. I collapse.”

How It Shows Up:

- Sudden collapse in energy, feeling like giving up
- Muscle floppiness or physical collapse
- Feeling unable to speak, move, or respond

- Body goes limp or overly compliant
- Episodes that resemble fainting or dissociative shutdowns

What It's Protecting:

- A state of overwhelming, often inescapable, threat (especially in early trauma)
- Trauma rooted in immobilization or being powerless

How to Regulate Flop:

- **Support the body:** Lie down with cushions or curl into a fetal position
- **Soothe the system slowly:** Use low light, soft sounds, weighted blankets
- Engage with **very gentle stimulation:** Warm water, soft tapping
- Reassure your body: "It's okay to be here now. I'm not trapped."

6. Fragment Response

"I don't know who I am. I feel broken or unreal."

How It Shows Up:

- Feeling shattered, scattered, or like different parts of you don't belong together
- Identity confusion or loss of self
- Flashbacks, derealization, or depersonalization
- Feeling emotionally fragmented or "not real"

What It's Protecting:

- Experiences too overwhelming for the brain to hold in one coherent timeline
- Trauma that created internal splitting or disconnection

How to Regulate Fragmentation:

- **Reunite with the body:** Touch your arms, name where you are
- **Anchor with rhythm:** Drumming, rocking, heartbeat sounds

- Say aloud: “I am here. This is now. I am whole.”
- Try **mirror work**, **internal dialogue**, or **parts integration therapy**

You are not wrong for your trauma response.

You are not broken.

***These patterns are not personality flaws—
they are survival imprints.***

***With gentleness, awareness, and regulation,
you can return to your center.***

You can learn what safety feels like.

You can build a life that doesn't rely on these responses for survival.